

Pastor Jim Lloyd

Date: April 23, 2023

Title: WE ARE A WORK IN PROGRESS

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:2-9

²"To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ - their Lord and ours: ³Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵For in him you have been enriched in every way - in all your speaking and in all your knowledge - ⁶because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. ⁷Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful."

ILLUSTRATION: The Leaning Tower of Pisa. For a couple of minutes, let's go to Italy. My daughter and son-in-law actually arrived in Italy at about midnight our time and 7am Italy's time. That's a bit confusing to me, but I think they've been there about 9-10 hours (9am service), 10-11 hours (11am service). I assume you have at least seen pictures of the Tower of Pisa. Let me share a few. Some are more entertaining than others. (Here Pastor showed several silly pictures that people had taken of individuals "holding up" the Tower of Pisa.) I think Lino must have taken this one. (Here Pastor showed a picture of the Tower of Pisa completely made out of pepperoni pizza.) The tower is located in Pisa, Italy. For centuries it was assumed that it was designed by the 12th century architect Bonanno Pisano. In recent years there has been speculation that the building was designed by an architect named Diotisalvi. Whoever designed it, you can be sure of this: the leaning aspect was NOT included in the original blueprint. It WAS intended to stand up straight. It's interesting to note that the original designer - whoever it was - did not live to see its completion. That's because from the day they broke ground to the proverbial ribbon cutting ceremony, it took a total of - get this - 199 years! That is rather amazing that it took so long, when you consider how long it took to build other historical monuments. The Roman Coliseum was built in 10 years. The Great Pyramid of Giza took 20 years. Buckingham Palace took 23 years. So, it's surprising that a building that doesn't quite stand up straight took 199 years to complete. What a work in progress. Imagine the number of laborers who spent their entire lives on this project and never saw it come to completion. And... You wonder how many of them stopped at one point and said, "Is it my imagination, or does this building seem to be leaning or crooked?" I find the leaning aspect of the tower fascinating, in that, it's still standing after all these years, AND... According to the experts, it isn't expected to fall, BUT... What I REALLY find fascinating is the 199 YEARS PART - the work in progress.

No doubt you've seen at some time, on your daily drive to work, a building under construction. I took pictures of the building going up just down the road and forgot to put them in my PowerPoint. I saw the beginnings of a building. First, I saw poles go up and wondered if they were building a billboard sign. Then I saw the sides go up. Then the trusses were added. I started thinking, "Oh look, there's a new building. I wonder what it will be." You may want to take notice of the progress these next weeks. The frame is completed. Next, we'll likely see the walls, the windows, and the exterior. Perhaps there will be a grand opening soon. It goes up so quickly, often in a matter of weeks, and it's easy to observe the steady progress. However, when a building takes 199 years to complete, you might go decades without seeing any measurable change. But... If you keep at it, eventually you just might have a building that's classified as a "classic."

Here's my point - SPIRITUAL GROWTH - the process of becoming holy, the process of becoming like Jesus - is more like the construction of the Leaning Tower of Pisa than it is like the construction down the street. It doesn't happen quite as quickly as we would like. In fact, sometimes it seems like the work will never be done. Self-help writer Regina Brett has referred to people who are "a work in progress ... without the progress." We've all known some who qualify, I suppose. To be honest, sometimes that label might fit me. We don't always see spiritual progress in our lives as often as we would like to see it ... But... IF you're a follower of Jesus

Christ and you continue to abide in Him, the Apostle Paul has good news for us: The building will be completed. It will pass inspection, AND... It will last forever!

Today we'll look at a passage of Scripture that talks about this very idea. We are looking at the first chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. (Actually, there is evidence that this is the 2nd letter, making 2nd Corinthians the 3rd letter.) 1 Corinthians is the 2nd longest letter of the New Testament. (Romans is slightly longer.) A number of years ago there was a humor that began - "I have some good news and some bad news. Which do you want to hear first?" One such joke went - The deacon went golfing and got a hole-in-one. That was the good news. The bad news was that it was at 9:30am (11:30am) on a Sunday morning and he couldn't tell anyone. Corinthians is one of those Good News - Bad News letters. Things weren't going so well in the Corinthian church. There were deep divisions in the church. The church was tolerating sexual immorality of the incestuous kind. Believers were suing one another in court. Some got drunk at the agape feast. Some even denied the physical resurrection of Jesus. 1 Corinthians was written in the year 55, give or take a year, and it was written to the church - which was actually a network of house churches - in the sophisticated seaport city of Corinth. Corinth was a key city in terms of commerce and tourism. It was notable as a city filled with idolatry and an "anything-goes" approach to morality. This worldly attitude of Corinth sometimes found its way into the church and created many a problem for the believers there. The church in Corinth was, in some ways, a church in disarray, and a church in need of leadership and correction. At times, Paul spoke to them in a rather harsh, shape-up-or-ship-out manner. And at other times he spoke to them gently, with great encouragement and optimism. That's because this body of believers - who at times may have seemed not-so-good - were still God's people, bought with a price and heirs to the promise. Just like we are. Today we may not deal with the same issues that plagued the church in Corinth, but we've not yet attained perfection either - not as a church, not as individuals. We, too, are STILL a work in progress, so Paul's words to the church in Corinth also apply to us today.

Today, we will take a closer look at the verses we read earlier. These first verses hold for us the Good News. More difficult words to the Corinthian Church come later. I want us to see three aspects of the WORK-IN-PROGRESS God is doing in your life.

1. YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE HOLINESS YOU DON'T YET SHOW. Paul begins this letter saying - *"...to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy..."* The word SANCTIFIED means "set apart for a special purpose." Or... You could say, "made holy for a special purpose." And what is that special purpose? Our special purpose, according to Paul, is that we BECOME HOLY, that we BECOME LIKE CHRIST. We have been set apart so that we might become who we were meant to be. I want you to see this distinction. 1 Thessalonians 5:23 say that the *"God of peace WILL SANCTIFY you completely."* 1 Corinthians 1:2 says that we HAVE BEEN SANCTIFIED in Christ Jesus. Which is it? BOTH are true. We HAVE BEEN sanctified IN WORD so that we may BECOME sanctified IN DEED. We were set apart at salvation so that as we live the Christian life, we might become holy, and we might become like Jesus. To say that God has given us holiness we don't yet have or yet show is like saying that He's given us a title we haven't yet attained. Imagine calling someone the heavyweight boxing champion of the world before they ever stepped into the ring. Imagine naming a student as Senior Class Valedictorian on their first day of kindergarten. God has made you holy BY HIS WORD, so that you may become holy in ALL THAT YOU DO, BUT... Let's not forget that becoming holy is a process, AND... YOU are a work in progress, AND... Sometimes some of us might not live up to the calling we have been given. Dare I use Charles III, the monarch of England, to illustrate? True or False: We've always known him as Prince Charles, the heir apparent to the throne. That didn't change, even when he didn't act quite so kingly. He was still destined to be the king that he HAS become. Ray Stedman was preaching one day, and he felt to do something that he had never done before. He read the 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 list of people that were in the world and had now been saved and were a part of the Corinthian church. That list included some who were sexually immoral, male prostitutes, homosexual offenders, thieves, greedy, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers. In verse 11 he read, *"And such were some of you."* Then he said, "I'd like to ask if there are any in this congregation that any

one of those words in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 would describe you before you came to Christ. I'd like for you to stand." There was a young man in that congregation who had just been converted in a Billy Graham meeting. He had never been to church before in his life. He came to church with fear and trembling. He heard Stedman's question, and he looked around. For a while, there was an awkward pause, and no one stood. Then a little old lady in the second row took courage and stood up. Several other people began to stand. When all were through standing, 2/3 of the congregation were on their feet. After the service, this young man, who had just been converted, came up to Pastor Stedman and said, "I came here with fear and trembling today because I'd never been in a church before. But when you asked that question and all those people stood - these are my kind of people." Sanctified is not one of those words that is particularly easy to articulate. Again, sanctify means "to be set apart for some specific, sanctimonious, restrictive function." Like something in the Old Testament that was set apart exclusively for worship of the Lord and it was not to be used for other purposes. ILLUSTRATION: Take the TOOTHBRUSH. Would you agree that the toothbrush has been set apart for a specific function? Perhaps an old and much used toothbrush will be used for other things like cleaning shoes or something, BUT... In a real sense, a toothbrush is to be sanctified for our teeth. To go a bit further, MY toothbrush is sanctified for MY teeth. I have a personal AND exclusive toothbrush. That's not something that I care to share with someone else. It is called TOOTHBRUSH not CALLED TO BE a toothbrush. How can you "call it to be a toothbrush" when IT IS a toothbrush? Just the way Paul here is calling the Corinthians "saints." They are not called to be saints - future tense. They are called "saints" - present tense. Because that's what they are. They've been set apart for God. There is a little difference between a saint and a toothbrush, in that, a saint has freedom of will to NOT act like a saint should. But even when the saints in Corinth were not acting like they should, Paul nevertheless says, "I want you to keep in mind your calling. You have been set apart for something in this world. YOU have a particular and special function. You are holy ones." Paul is NOT saying regarding sanctification, "Start acting better and then you can be sanctified." It is, "You ARE sanctified. You have been set apart. Therefore, begin acting like it." Paul appeals to them on the basis of something that's already been done. God has a calling on your life - a calling that is without revocation (Romans 11:29 - "*For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.*") He won't take it back and He won't change His mind. He called you to be holy, and He will make you holy. Someone once said, "God will make you holy, even if He has to drag you kicking and screaming all the way." So, keep this in mind. Even though you haven't quite yet attained the title you've been given, remember that you are a work in progress. GOD ISN'T FINISHED WITH YOU YET! To get there, here's the second idea that I want you to see.

2. YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN ALL THE GIFTS THAT YOU WILL EVER NEED. And they will come to you at the right time when you need them. Verse 5 - "*...in him you have been enriched in every way - in all your speaking and in all your knowledge...*" Verse 7 - "*Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus.*" Later, in chapter 12, Paul will detail how every believer is given at least one spiritual gift. AT LEAST one, and often MORE than one. In fact, scripture warrants that you can be sure that God will give you whatever you need when you need it. This is what Paul says in Philippians 4:19 - "*And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.*" Many assume this verse refers primarily to our material needs. Our material needs can be included, of course, but this verse refers to so much more. This is a promise that if you will allow, God will give you whatever you need in the moment you need it. He'll give you the STRENGTH you need, the COURAGE you need, the DETERMINATION you need, the GRACE you need, the MERCY you need. Whatever God has *called* you to do, He will *equip* you and *empower* you to do it. Perhaps you've been tempted to say, as I have been, "I'm not sure I have what it takes to do what God is leading me to do; I'm not sure that I have what it takes to be the person God intends me to be." But... You DO have what it takes - not in your own strength, but in His strength and His power at work in you. Listen to what Paul said to the church in Philippi, "*For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose*" (Philippians 2:13). This verse is saying that God gives you the DESIRE to do good, and He gives you the ABILITY to do good. The gifts you need to live a holy life are already yours in Christ Jesus. This is what he wanted the believers in Corinth to understand, even though at the moment there was a bit of a disconnect between their calling and

their current condition. They were still a work in progress - JUST LIKE WE ARE! This process may be taking longer than you would like, which brings me to the third truth I want you to see.

3. YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE VICTORY YOU CAN'T YET SEE. Think of the process involved in building this tower. Construction began in August 1173 with the laying of the foundation. Fast forward 100 years. It's now 1273, and the building still isn't finished. In fact, it's barely half done. It looks like it will never be completed. But... Just wait. It will be completed. And... When it is, it will be magnificent. As Jesus' ministry on earth came to a close, things seemed to quickly unravel for Him and this band of unschooled ruffians that followed Him around. He became a political and religious target, with every effort made to sabotage His work and turn the tide of public opinion against Him. He was betrayed by a friend, then arrested, beaten, ridiculed, and abandoned by nearly all. As He was led to His death, He did not seem in that moment like the conquering hero. He didn't appear to be the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. He seemed more like a misguided martyr. Nothing could be further from the truth because it had already been determined – even before the foundation of the world – that the grave could not contain Him, that He would rise victorious over sin and death, and He would reign forever and ever. His was a victory that could not yet be seen, but it was as real as it could be. AND... I want you to know that HIS victory has paved the way for YOUR victory. Today you may feel that you will never get there ... but I want you to know that God has given you a victory you can't yet see, and He will bring His work in your life to completion. This is why Paul said... *"He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of Christ."* This phrase *"strong to the end"* means that He will sustain you. He will empower you, and when He needs to, He will carry you. As Paul said to the church in Philippi... *"...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 1:6). Your potential to become great in God's kingdom may not be obvious to others. It may not be obvious to you. But... God sees, because He put it there, and He plans to make it happen. [Even if sometimes He has to drag you kicking and screaming along the way.] God will finish what He began in you ... even if it seems to take forever.

CONCLUSION. The Leaning Tower of Pisa took 199 years to complete. It wasn't long before what some had seen during the construction process became obvious to all. It was leaning a full 5 degrees. It looked like it could fall at any minute. This vulnerability reminds me of something Paul would later say to this same Corinthian church, not in his first letter, but in his second. When he's talking about some of the trials he has faced, he quotes Christ as saying to him... *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"* (2 Corinthians 12:9). The leaning aspect of the Tower of Pisa could be considered a defect, but it could also be considered an architectural miracle. A leaning building should fall ... but this one hasn't, and, according to the experts, it won't. The tilt has become, instead, a fascinating feature. Now, you and me ... we lean a little bit. We're not all that level. In fact, we could quite easily be susceptible to a fall ... except for the architectural miracle of the work of Jesus Christ in our lives. If you know Him as Lord and Savior, He has sanctified you and set you apart and called you holy and is making you holy. He has given you the gifts you need to become the person He made you to be ... and He has every intention of finishing the work He began. We may still lean a little bit, but... When we yield ourselves fully to Him, He is sure to sustain us. In our weakness, His power is made perfect. You and I are a work in progress. The progress may not always be observable by those on the outside ... but the progress IS being made. That's God's promise to those who abide – continue – in Him. You can be sure that He will finish the work He began in you, and you will stand strong for eternity to come. One more thing in closing. Paul usually has a greeting in his letters. In the greeting, GRACE always comes before PEACE. It is NEVER peace and grace. It's always GRACE and peace. Peace comes ultimately from that Old Testament word "SHALOM." It means not just the cessation of hostility, but total well-being inside. It means being totally at rest. What the psychologists call an "integrated personality." A person who is whole. Paul says, "If you want to know what wholeness is like, then don't start with peace, START WITH GRACE. Because grace is that which God gives to us that NONE of us deserve. But when grace is given, peace results. 1 Corinthians 1:3 – *"Grace to you and peace, from our Lord Jesus Christ."*